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1. **INTRODUCTION**

 There is God; both reason and revelation are univocal on this point; and religious traditions of over ten millennia of human existence only serve to perpetuate and transmit this as a cultural package from one generation to another. The task of “Anthropology of Religion” as a course is to dig into the root of religion in man, and use these to explain certain religious phenomena and practices. Among other things, it treats of the universality of religion, various theories of the origin of religion, and the practice of religion among believers and adherents. We shall dig to unearth the attributes in man’s nature and cultural development that are responsible for the thriving of religion; and perhaps catch a glimpse of what the future of religion could be from the future of man to see how these and religion could be employed in the service of human integral development.

To proceed, we shall unearth the more popular theories of religion and the scholars involved in the study of religion. This equip us with enough data to attempt some definitions of religion as a window into its nature and content wherein it’s essential attributes and accidental qualities are exposed. A distinctive section on the Anthropology of religion shall focus on defending on various counts the presupposition that the human reality in essentially “religious” in its ontological constitution. A more existential section shall focus on “Man and Religion” featuring such sub-topics as: Religious experience, Divine revelation, Mysticism, and the Practice and Role of Religion. Without presuming to know so much about religion, our thesis leaves open some unanswered questions on religion as well as some task to be achieved by the various religious traditions for a more integral human development with which we bring the inquiry to rest. We begin with some anthropological presupposition: Religion as a Cultural Universal.

1. **RELIGION AS A CULTURAL UNIVERSAL**

Alone of all life forms on the planet, man proves to be naturally religious and can sometimes be notoriously so. In his natural and cultural evolution, the Homo sapiens has adapted religion to all his geographical locations and successive civilizations such that religion has become so co-extensive with humankind as his last “court of appeal” on the question of meaning and ultimate destiny. From an anthropological point of view, religion belongs to a culture’s superstructure - the collective body of ideas, beliefs, norms and values, by which a group of people give coherence and organic order to their lives, and makes sense of the world and their place in it. Hunter and Whitten identified two kinds of belief systems: the Instrumental or Technical and the Transcendental belief systems. The first is concerned primarily with practical day-to-day subsistence activities, travel nourishment, health, etc. They provide people with practical guideline by which they can structure their day-to-day behavior patterns. Transcendental belief systems take us beyond daily concerns to provide “the structure through which human beings give meaning and purpose to existence” (E.A. Oke. 2006:183); that is to say that they address questions of existence and ultimate concerns. This is where religion belongs. In other words, they address the central question of human existence” of ultimate concerns. This is where religion belongs.

“While recognizing that not all individuals believe in a supernatural force or entity, anthropologists know of no group of people anywhere on the face of the earth, who at any time over the past 100,000 years, has been without the manifestation of spirituality or religion” (W.A. Haviland, e.t.al: 2011:529); its hallmark being the belief in spiritual forces or/and beings and supernatural beings. From his sociobiological field of study, below is what Edward Wilson has to report on the universality of religion: “Sacred traditions occur almost universally in human societies. So do myths that explain the origin of man or at the very least the relation of the tribe to the rest of the world. But belief in high gods is not universal. Among 81 hunter-gatherer societies surveyed by Whiting (1968), only 28 or 35 percent, included high gods in their sacred traditions” (E.O. Wilson. 2000: 560). It appears that in many cultures and religions, the greater the deity, the more remote it is to human existential life while the lower deity are more or less closely involved in human affairs. Religion shows itself to be an inseparable element in human nature, and is as universal as man himself. This indeed is the unanimous testimony of the social sciences such as Anthropology, Sociology and others, namely, that there is no tribe without some rudimentary religious ideas and customs (G.A. Oshitelu. 2010:8). For, the idea of sin and reparation for sin; moral values and an idea of the sacred; a vision of the world and life after death; and communion with the spiritual world – these are all integral to all known human cultures; and religion harmonizes all these for them.

Expectedly, religion is often deeply mixed with culture; and it is often difficult to distinguish neatly where culture ends and where religion begins. In fact, according to the renowned Catholic Theologian, Joseph Ratzinger, “there is no such thing as a culture-free faith and because – outside of modern technical civilization – there is no such thing as religion-free culture” (J. Ratzinger. 2004:64). For, if culture embraces the whole of a people’s scheme of life, then, religion gives direction and colour to that scheme. In Africa, for instance,

There is such extroversion in the tribal forms of drumming, dancing and in all forms of artistic expression in this region, all so different from the introversion of the yogic traditions of India. Spiritually, the African peoples have an awareness of a High God Creator of the world. But the peoples are generally more in contact with the spirit world that is found in the elements, the air, the water, in all natural phenomena”.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Even among the men of science, religious sentiments are not wanting, as scientists are now discovering and bearing witness to the superior intelligibility of the universe, thereby discovering in the world of nature the ancient “God of the philosophers” that is given more perfect form by the “God of Faith” of the great world religions. The greatest scientists have a “religious” dimension to their investigation which prevents them from relapsing into categorical atheism even in their pure scientific pursuits; and which makes them either to profess belief in God or at least in a numinous ground of reality and existence. This is true of Isaac Newton, Leibnitz, Descartes, Galileo, and many great others. “Einstein said once that in the laws of nature ‘an intelligence so superior is revealed that in comparison all the significance of human thinking and human arrangements is a completely worthless reflection’”.[[2]](#footnote-2)

According to Adewale Oke (2006:186-189), there are about three groups of theories to account for this universality of religion: the psychological, the sociological, and other theories. The first is based on the need to reduce anxiety and uncertainty felt by all people of all times and places; and the second is the need to provide human society with symbolic forms through which they can ritually enact the group’s integration and thus become more stable. While Sigmund Freud champions the first set of theories, Emile Durkheim leads in the second. Other theories are essentially a combination of the psychological and sociological needs theories. Clifford Geertz and Anthony Wallace are the chief proponents of these other theories of religion.

1. **THE STUDY OF RELIGION: SCHOLARS AND THEORIES**

If we tentatively define religion as an organized system of ideas and beliefs about spiritual and supernatural realities, along with associated ceremonial practices by which people try to interpret their experience and influence what is otherwise beyond their control, then, we must say that the study of religion as a distinctive academic discipline began only in the 19th century when the technique of philosophy, historical enquiry, psychology, anthropology, sociology and other human sciences were employed to bear upon the history, origin and functions of religion.

**3.1 THE STUDY OF RELIGION**

“The study of the world religions begins when one observes with seriousness religious pluralism; the study has foundation when religious experiences and expressions are made intelligible to those outside the tradition; the study flourishes when significant meaning is grasped by the outsider” (W. Cenkner: 1999: 862). The modern phase in the study of religion begins in the 18th century when the first knowledge of the so called “primitive religions” through the reports and souvenirs of the European missionaries and merchants and missionaries who traveled to the third and the new worlds. Three major intellectual influences impacted on the modern study of religions: “evolution, empiricism, and interiority”. But the study advanced with the emergence of the humanistic discipline of anthropology, sociology, history, psychology and phenomenology. Thus, “the study of world religions became not only multi-disciplinary but also multi-methodological and multi-cultural (Ibid).

Bolaji idowu identifies three handicaps to the study of religion: Ignorance, Prejudice and the Scientific method narrowly defined. Appearance is often taken for reality; religion is often confused with culture; and there is the ever-menacing habit and bias of writing about other people’s religion, with unhealthy comparison and distortion. (B. Idowu. 1973: 6). Akin-Otiko (2020:34-36) takes it up from there and identifies three categories of scholars who write about religion. **The first are the travelers** (western merchants, missionaries, voyagers etc) who travelled to Asia, Africa and other parts of the world and reports their experiences with people of other cultures including their religions. These reports are loaded with biases, distortions, and exaggerations and lacks accuracy. **The second category of scholars are the sit-at-home or arm-chair scholars** who eagerly awaited the reports and data from travelers. They listened to the reports and analyzed the objects they came back with in religious terms with preconceived ideas, adding more distortions to those of the travelers.

And how frequently have travelers’ tales found their ways as facts into writings which claim to be scholarly works! Some of this ‘discredit must go to the ethnologists and paleontologists who “wanted an excuse for slavery, and some also to those who desire to find a missing link between men and monkeys. The menace of this unwitting collaboration between the traveler and the stay-at-home investigator is in the oracular way in which their joint efforts produces pronouncements which are unfortunately swallowed bodily by a gullible public (B. Idowu: 1973:8).

**The third group are the committed scholars** involved in the study of religion, and they are of two sub-divisions: the first are specialists in various areas of study not directly related to religion but are still related to it as secondary or tertiary object of study (historians, sociologists, anthropologists, humanists, etc). The second sub-group are the real scholars who are devoted specifically to the study of religion: theologians, sociologists and anthropologists and scholars of the study of religion. As the study of man in his totality, Anthropology’s contribution to the study of religion lies in establishing religion as a constituent of and originating from human nature, along with its importance and effects in growing cultures.

It is the contention of many scholars that today a serious and thorough study of religion must reflect three levels of analysis: the Social historical analysis, the Experiential-mystical analysis, and the Philosophical theological analysis As presented by William Cenkner: “we need better to understand how other religious traditions continually form and reform us as we form and reform them. To take religious pluralism with seriousness has been a major challenge to modern intellectual life” (cf. J. Komonchak, e.t.al: 1999: 867-868).

**3.2 THEORIES OF RELIGION: AN OVERVIEW**

As a foreword to the discourse on the theories of religion, we note with Alfred Garvie three possible questions: a) What is source of And reason for man’s being religious in his own nature; b) What is the source of and the reason for man’s being religious in the condition of the world in which he finds himself; and c) What is the earliest form in which religion has appeared so far as we trace back its development. He then advocated a distinction, for the purpose of study, between: “Experience of religion”, and “Expressions of religion”. Accordingly,

In the experience of religion we may assume that there is something universal and permanent, something rooted in, springing out of human nature; the expression will depend on local and temporary conditions, physical, mental, moral and social. To ignore or to neglect this difference is to lay hold on the accidental instead of the essential, the contingent instead of the necessary. To explain how and why men conceived the gods in a certain way is not to explain how and why they conceived god at all; and yet many theories of the origin of religion, as we shall see, are content with the superficial treatment of the subject, probably because their authors had not made the distinction for themselves” (B. Idowu. 1973: 33-34).

**Anthropological Theory of Religion**

 Ludwig Feuerbach (1804 – 1872) claims that religion is nothing other than the worship of human nature. When man thinks he is worshipping God, he is only worshipping himself, his own nature projected outside of himself as God. He maintains that in the process of forming the concept of God, man alienates himself; he strips himself of his best qualities – his goodness, beauty, justice, power, wisdom, mercy, etc- and projects them outside himself into an imaginary being which he calls God. But in doing this, he removes all limitations and human imperfections from the image so that the imaginary being – God – is seen to be limitless, perfect, infinite and in fact Absolute. Feuerbach admits that man is finite but has an idea of infinity because the idea of one presupposes the other. But this infinite being is nothing other than the collective human nature, the generality of humanity which is infinite indeed. Individual men are finite, but the collective human nature, is infinite, and this is what man worships as God.

Feuerbach contends that all he has said is confirmed by the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation in which God became man in Jesus Christ to show that God is nothing but humanity. Incarnation also shows that human nature is actually divine since Christ who is man is said to be God. And he quotes St Augustine for support: “*Deus homo factus est, ut homo Deus fieret*” (God became man so that man might become God). Hence, man’s earnest yearning for God is nothing but his thirst for his perfect human nature. (Omoregbe. 1999:4-6). This leave open ample room for anthropomorphism in religion and neither can any religion escape it, we can only talk of more or less of it in comparing religion. It also makes sense to accept the thomistc and scholastic conception of religious language which is neither univocal nor equivocal, but analogical.

**Sociological Theory of Religion**

Unlike Feuerbach, Emile Durkheim (1853 – 1917**)** has argued that man creates god in the image of his society. In this sense, religion takes after the model and organization of the society as the gods are conceived to reflect the socio-cultural system by means of the supernatural world. So, God and the society are one and the same. What Feuerbach cedes to the general human nature, Durkheim gives the human society. Guy Swanson (1960), in a study based on fifty religions which covered the major world religions, concluded that there is a strong relationship between social systems and religions. The study revealed a significant correlation between levels of social organization and the numbers and powers of gods (E .A. Oke. 2006:196-197). Durkheim is not alone in the sociological theory of religion; among other greats in scholarship, he is supported by Max Weber and Edward Wilson in particular; the later sees the deity as no less than a “superman”, who like other “supers” in the social animal species, is the society of the social animal in question; and religious rituals reflect the values and morals of the society. Hence,

The superman, like the super-ant or super-wolf, can never be an individual, it is the society whose members diversify and cooperate to create a composite well beyond the capacity of any conceivable organism….Most human rituals have more than just an immediate signal value. As Durkheim stressed, they not only label but reaffirm and rejuvenate the moral values of the community. The sacred rituals are the most distinctive human. Their most elementary forms are concerned with magic, the active attempt to manipulate nature and the gods….In more complex societies, polity and religion have always blended naturally. Power belongs to kings by divine right, but high priests often ruled over kings by virtue of the higher rank of the gods. (E. Wilson. 2000: pp. 554, 560).

So, when men worship God or practice religion, it is in essence the society worshipping itself; it is the social values of the society that is being represented in rituals and symbols, and worship is the expression of the collective consciousness of the society. So, the voice of God is actually the voice of the society, it is “*Vox populi, vox Dei*” (The vice of the people is the voice of God).

**Psychological Theory of Religion**

For Sigmund Freud (1586 – 1939) religion is a projection into adulthood the childhood neurosis of a father-figure. A child sees his father as a strong wall of support and protection, as the ultimate provider for his needs and answer to any of his questions and concerns. He finds comfort and security in the arms of his father. In other words, the child regards his father as the figure of absolute power. But as he grows, the supremacy of his father becomes untenable; the father becomes inadequate to meet all his needs and demands, as his limitations becomes more obvious. So, he projects the father image into the deity above to whom he turns for security and to satisfy this infantile neurosis; the idea of God is thus created to fill the vacuum of a father figure who protects, have solution to all his needs and answers all his questions. Religion therefore has its origin in man’s attempt to project into the heavens the belief in a cosmic father in place of his human father who is not inadequate to meet his needs and demands. In his ‘Totem and Taboo’, Freud states that the totem is nothing other than a surrogate father in which, after finding the inadequacy of the biological father as one grows up, the father regains his human shape. In his own words: “I should like to insist that the beginnings of religion and art converge in the Oedipus complex. This is in complete agreement with the psychoanalytic finding that the same complex constitutes the nucleus of all neuroses so far as our present knowledge goes” (S. Freud: 156ff; B. Idowu. 1973:40-41).

What his psychological theory of religion implies, therefore, is that religion is childishness carried to adulthood, it is a sort of fixation that is supposed to have been outgrown but which still lingers into adulthood as to constitute a psychological need. Auguste Comte is of the same opinion with Sigmund Freud on the origin of religion. For both secularist scholars, “the religious mentality is a primitive, childish mentality, which belongs to the earliest phase in the development of human mind” (J.I. Omoregbe. 1999: 9).

**Theological Theory of Religion**

In the theological theory of religion, it is human spirit itself searching for its ultimate source which is the Infinite Spirit – God, as if to stand with universal authority the words of St Augustine: “God, you have made us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they rest in you”. This is the theory supported by religious practitioners/believers and most theologians of the great religions, with theory advocates numbered in thousands. With reference to other scholars, Bolaji Idowu expounds it at some length (B. Idowu. 1973: 52-53).

His point of departure is the idea of “Revelation” in the context of the study of religion. It is a theological word which means “self-disclosure”. So, there is an agent who reveals and there is a mind which apprehends the revelation. Thus, revelation by definition means “divine self-disclosure”. Rudolf Otto calls the experience of the Divine “*Mysterium tremendum et fascinans*” (The Mystery that terrifies and fascinates). The question then is, can one speak strictly of ‘the numinous’ or the sacred manifesting itself unless one implies a living Being as the agent of such manifestation? Manifestation or revelation presupposes an agent with a conscious will causing a situation by which the manifestation could be apprehended. Thus, it also implies purpose – all of which point in the direction of a conscious being who wills and acts. It follows therefore that there must be something in man that makes him addressable by the Divine and responsible (capable of responding) to the Divine. Christian theology calls it *“Imago Dei*” – the spark of God in man which makes him addressable by God and brings him in dialogue with the divine. H.H. Farmer states it well:

Living, essential religion we shall take to be God’s personal encounter with man; being personal, the encounter involves capacity on both sides. On the one hand, a divine initiative of self-disclosure towards man, and on the other hand, man’s self-conscious apprehension of and response to that approach” (cf. B. Idowu. 1973, 55).

It is our contention here and now that if any of the above theories of religion is true of one religion, then it is true of all, and it is false for one religion, then it is false for all. It also means that if religion as such has its origin in human nature, and human nature is one, then, true religion that worth the name religion is basically one in various forms just as human nature is one in different races or varieties. Our common human nature makes us a single species that can interbred successfully and continue to procreate; similarly, the unity of religion from its one human nature means that all religions should be one in essence,e and can inter-relate essentially without anyone losing what is uniquely its own. This opens the way to two approaches in the world of religions: syncretism and inter-religious dialogues in theory and practice.

1. **DEFINITION AND NATURE OF RELIGION**
	1. **DIFFICULTY IN DEFINING RELIGION**

Like many general concepts in the various disciplines, Religion too does not lend itself to easy definition because it is not everything that can pass for religion, not even morality, as it has its own proper features. To reduce religion to anything one strongly believes in is obviously a reductionist approach which is doomed to failure at the onset. Again, there are definitions of religion from theistic, atheistic, agnostic, secularist, political, philosophical and other approaches which in varying degrees strip religion of its essence. These are to say nothing of the ordinary and unprofessional definitions of religion which fuses and incorporate many activities and human concerns into it or the materialist definition which contends that “religion can only exists if it refers in the final analysis to the world of nature as a whole or as divinized, and not to any supreme and personal deity; or the secularist definition which sees religion as” “old-fashioned and unnecessary part of contemporary life. It holds the opinion that humanity has finally come of age and has no more need for religion. What secularists do not say is to deny the past or current existence of religion” (A. Akin-Otiko. 2020:13).

The difficulty is defining religion is heavily expressed in Anon’s warning:“Such a definition should apply to nothing but religion, and should differentiate religion from anything else – from imaginative idealization, art, morality, philosophy. It should apply to everything which is naturally and commonly called religion: to religion as a subjective spiritual state, and to all religions, high or low, true or false, which have obtained objective historical realization” (cf. B. Idowu. 1973:69). It becomes obvious then that no single definition can correctly capture the essence of religion as different scholars of relevance lends their voice to make sense of the reality all of which should be seen as complementary or touching on some aspects of it.

**4.2 DEFINITIONS OF RELIGION**

 The term “religion” has its root in the Latin words “*Ligare”* (meaning, “to bind”), “*relegare*” (“to unite”), and “*religio”* (that is ‘relationship’). From its etymology, therefore, religion is a relationship that binds two parties together in a lasting friendship, in this case, man and God or the divine. In practice, religion is a particular system, or a set of systems, in which doctrines, myths, rituals, sentiments, institutions, and other similar elements are interconnected. As the meeting point between God and humans, religion is the recognition of a transcendental deity believed to exist, and a consequent relationship of submission and dependence with the supernatural being. It is an encounter of man with God from which a lasting relationship is developed. Below is a selection of the various definitions scholars have given to religion.

**Max Muller**: Religion is a perception of the Infinite.

**Immanuel Kant**: Religion is a recognition of our duties as divine commands.

**Schleiermacher**: Religion is a feeling of absolute dependence, of pure and entire passiveness.

**J.B. Pratt**: Religion is the serious and social attitude of individuals or communities towards the power or powers which they conceive as having ultimate control over their interest and destinies.

**A.C. Bouquet**: Religion means a fixed relationship between the human self and some non-human entity, the Sacred, the Supernatural, the Self-Existent, the Absolute, or simply ‘God’

**B. Idowu:** Religion results from man’s spontaneous awareness and reaction to his immediate awareness of a Living Power, ‘Wholly Other’ and infinitely greater than himself; a Power mysterious because unseen, yet a present and urgent Reality, seeking to bring man into communion with Himself. “Religion in its essence is the means by which God as Spirit and man’s essential self-communicate. It is something resulting from the relationship which God established from the beginning of (human) life between himself and man”. (1973: 75).

**J. I. Omoregbe:** Religion is a relationship established between man and a transcendental personal being, s deity, believed to exist and worshipped by man (1993:3).

**Akin-Otiko**: “I would define religion as a means of maintaining a relationship with one’s source/creator, with the aim of returning to that same source/creator at the end of one’s life on earth. Anything that does not lead one to maintain a relationship with one’s source/creator, and invariably does not lead one back to this origin/creator, is not religion” (2015:6).

The above are all theistic definitions which take as their starting point the believers’ belief in God. The religious person expresses his relationship and communication with God in: sacrifices, prayers, penance, other forms of worship and moral actions with religious connotations. Thus “the religious man tends to show special concern for values, morality and aesthetics…. He is likely to characterize behaviours not only as good and evil but also as holy and unholy; and people, not only as virtuous and vicious, but also as godly and ungodly”.[[3]](#footnote-3)

**4.3 ON THE NATURE OF RELIGION**

The authors of ‘Sociology. An Introductory Text contend that history has identified a number of founders of major religions in the world, but these great men are not founders of religion as such; they did not actually originate religion or religious practices but “in most cases they changed and modified existing religious systems that had become unsatisfactory in one way or the other”,[[4]](#footnote-4) with particular reference to Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam. What then constitutes the essence of religion?

Just like any other area of discourse, there exist a level of understanding that practitioners of religion enjoy, different from ‘observers’ of religion.

Every religion maintains that it is not only a state of mind in those who practice it, but an apprehension of the Truth which is independent of their minds altogether; and its whole significance for them resides in this. The sacred, the holy, this is the factor which is not only the cause but also that which gives religion its ethos, its meaning, its cohesion….Thus, in every religion, there are always the elements of changelessness and change. Religion in what may be known of its pristine state, and religion as practiced today form one tapestry showing how a person’s religion gives meaning and purpose to his world at every moment of time and how the changes in his world affects his theological formulation without necessarily changing the essence of religion for him” (B. Idowu. 1973:13-14)

Religion binds man to the Deity in a lasting relationship who is believed and recognized to exist and is the Ultimate ground of all that exist, quite alright; and the precise nature of this Ultimate may not be known, but its existence and relationship with it, were never in doubt. Often, it is simply a matter of faith, trust or strong conviction with the hope of reward here or and hereafter. Religion and its object therefore are naturally not a subject for empirical or conclusive demonstration. It also stands to reason that man cannot be the author of religion, for both “science an experience tell one that whatever is created can be controlled by the creator. The object of religion is obviously bigger than any human being and cannot be controlled by any human (A. Akin-Otiko. 2022:30). As such, religion in truth must be essentially what is revealed.

 For St Thomas Aquinas, religion is a virtue, an enduring quality and habit, which disposes man to pay well and steadfastly the debt of honour and worship that is his due to God. “Religion is the chief of the moral virtues because its acts are directed immediately to God’s honour and glory while the other moral virtues directs their acts to God through the medium of religion” (S. Th. IIa, IIae,: q. 81, no. 6). So, its end is union with God in whom is found the end of human existence, namely, perfect happiness

The authority and orthodoxy of Smith Cantwell on the essence of religion can not be doubted that: “For any man whose faith is vivid, even whose faith is at all alive, there are two qualities of that faith…that stand out so far as question of temporality are concerned: first, that it is timeless; second, that it is present. If religion is anything at all, it is something that links the present moment to eternity. Not to understand this is to have no fee of religion at all”.[[5]](#footnote-5) We therefore talk of the **essential qualities** of religion and the **accidental properties** of religion that apply to all religions indiscriminately and understood in their classical philosophical terms. The essential qualities would be those elements of religion which are to be found in every religion and irrespective of the culture and historical context in which it is practiced; while the accidental properties would be those features that are hinged to religion in varying degrees according to the situation of time and space, and can both evolved or be discarded without affecting the essence of the religion in question. The Catechism of the Catholic Church clearly distinguishes the two with the term “tradition”:

Tradition is to be distinguished from the various theological, disciplinary, liturgical, or devotional ‘traditions’ born in the local churches over time. These are the particular forms adapted to different places and times, in which the great ‘Tradition’ is expressed. In the light of Tradition, these traditions can be retained, modified or even abandoned under the guidance of the Church Magisterium (C.C.C. no. 83).

So, it is established that religion has both essential qualities and accidental properties. As for the number of the essential elements of religion, however, various numbers are listed by various scholars (see. Akin-Otiko: 2020: 43 – 46).

* **Alston (1972) names nine**: a) Belief in supernatural beings (gods);b) Distinction between the sacred and profane; c) Ritual acts focused on sacred objects; d) Moral code believed to be sanctioned by God; e) Characteristically religious feelings; f) Prayers and other forms of communications with God; g) Worldview and the place of man /individual therein; h) Organization of one’s life on the worldview; and i) A social group bond together by the above.
* **John Mbiti (1975) names five**: a) Beliefs; b) Practice, ceremonies, festivals; c) Religious objects and places; d) Values and morals; and e) Religious officials or leaders.
* **Osuafor (2000) names four**: a) Element of truth; b) Social element; c) Belief in the Supernatural; and e) Prayer.
* **Oshitelu names one in two**: Worship in form of prayer and sacrifice.
* **Akin-Otiko names five**: a) Awareness of the Ultimate; b) Awareness of ultimate destiny – where to return to; c) Method or template of reconciling with the divine; d) Rite of worshipping the Ultimate; and e) Teachings and doctrines.
1. **ANTHROPOLOGY OF RELIGION**: **THE HUMAN REALITY AS ESSENTIALLY “RELIGIOUS”**

**5.1 AN OVERVIEW OF ANTHROPOLOGICAL TRENDS AND APPROACHES**

William Cenkner well summarizes the trends and trajectory that the study of religion has taken among anthropologists: Theories of animism (E. Taylor), pre-animism (R.R. Marett and K.T. Preuss), the high sky-god (A. Lang), primitive monotheism (W. Schmidt), pre-logical mentality (L. Levy-bruhl) were responses to the question of the origin of religion. Bronislaw Malinowski (1884 -1942), through his rigorous field method of “participant observation” brought refinement to anthropological method. He also went beyond the question of religious origins and focused upon religion as a total way of life. Modern anthropology of religion is frequently divided between the social anthropologists (A.R. Radcliffe-Brown. E.E. Evans-Pritchard) who perceive religion as sustaining and legitimating the social order, and the structural anthropologists (C. Levi-Strauss and G. Dumezil in comparative literature) who perceive religion as ordering the environment and experiences. Social anthropologists seek out the function of religious institutions and facts; structuralists search for either the unconscious or conscious foundations of behavior and phenomenon. Clifford Geertz, Mary Douglas, and Victor Turner are representatives of the most contemporary anthropological approach to the study of religion which is to view religious phenomena as symbols and particular religions as symbolic worlds or symbol-systems. For all the above scholars, Anthropology supports the premise that religion supplies the resources to deal with the human suffering and the limitation of the human condition.[[6]](#footnote-6)

In what follows, we rightly bring under Anthropology of Religion all that the human being (*anthropus*) has discovered and proposed on religion, as much as we can accommodate for our purpose. This presupposes that there is such an objective reality as a common “human nature” – a given and a programme to be realized – on which the science of Anthropology itself as the study of human being in its totality is based in all its extensions, outcomes and derivatives.

**5.2 RELIGION AS ULTIMATELY ROOTED IN HUMAN TRANSCENDENCE**

The person is transcendental in so far as he is oriented beyond himself toward the Absolute as the source, sustainer and ultimate perfection of his existence. Thus, “transcendence is the movement with which man continually goes beyond himself. This movement has a direction: the Absolute” (R. Lucas. 2005: 320). It sets man apart from the rest of earthly creatures especially because of his ability for “*reditio completa”* (complete reflection) - of being present to himself in a conscious way, the capacity for abstraction of universals in the particulars (the capacity for complete reflection, the self-conscious ability to reflect around outside the self and back to self. Man’s inclination to self-transcendence is two-fold: horizontal and vertical; the first is historical as it implies going forward while remaining within the boundary of time and space; the second is metaphysical as it drives him to go upward and seek ultimate fulfillment in an “intuited Other”. According to Francesco Russo, it is constitutive of three essential powers: dynamism and tension, interiority and exteriority, and self-distancing and objectivity. At each point, man has the tendency and need to move forward, to seek for more, to exploit; to exteriorize his interiority; and project his own person as an object of critical reflection (E.G. Ekwuru. 2010:250-253). There is in him an insatiable inner drive that puts him in constant tension between possession and searching, totality and insufficiency, being and becoming.

Self-transcendence is the hallmark of man’s spirituality. Man is a spirit not because he has intellect and will (which are only its accidental qualities), but because he is a personal being who is constitutively opened to the Absolute Being. “Therefore, just as all aspects of man’s transcendence are exigencies and signs of personal immortality, so they are also signs of the existence of a creative God who stands at the centre of human existence as origin and destiny” (R. Lucas. 2005: 327). Though finite in itself, the human soul or spirit has a depth beyond measure; and its immensity in knowing and loving, in willing and imagining, in creativity and fantasizing, all point to a world of infinity beyond the present and the known.[[7]](#footnote-7) Garrigou-Lagrange and Cormac Burke are on point on the immensity of the human spirit:

Even if it were to be granted to us to see an angel, to behold without medium his supersensible and purely spiritual beauty, we would indeed at first be amazed. But our intelligence, knowing universal good, would not be slow in telling us that even this great good is a finite good, and would find this finite good very poor in comparison with good itself without limit and without any imperfection….Of necessity, then, there exists an infinite good which alone is capable of answering our aspirations. Otherwise, the universal amplitude of our will would be a psychological absurdity, a thing radically unintelligible, without raison d’etre” (R. Garrigou-Lagrange: 1991:10-11).

And again,

Human knowledge and creative ability ( ) constantly and are far greater than the capacity of any single individual to make his own. The greatest geniuses contribute so much – and yet so little, in proportion – to the whole in its never-ceasing growth. The greater the genius, the broader will be the perspective opening before him or her: of new knowledge, new discovery, more progress .…The very scientific spirit animating the pursuit of knowledge, if it is true to its own nature, rebels against the idea of one day coming to the end of its task because it will have discovered everything. No genuine science will accept the assertion: ‘Now there is nothing more for us to know’. The field of science naturally appears as lacking in boundary or limits. Man, in other words, in his mind’s search for truth, finds himself necessarily projected towards the infinite” (C. Burke. 2007: 169).

Besides mundane concerns, man’s spirit seeks “ultimate concerns”. If we must be logically consistent, therefore, with human self-transcendence, God logically becomes a strong “anthropological hypothesis” – the reasonable answer to our ultimate questions and human aspirations, not just the “given or presupposition” of religion and theology. So, “when a man, driven by his nature, transcends himself towards mankind and the material world (and beyond), he encounters the divine Thou, unless he prematurely stops the movement” (M. Schmaus. 1968: 22). It is not an empty space in a distant horizon that man tends in is transcendent aspirations. It will be nihilistically disappointing if the subject of these absolute values of man’s transcendent aspirations were to be some impersonal being incapable of communion or dialogue with man; for which reason the personal God of theism satisfies human transcendent yearnings more than any other alternative.

**5.3 HUMAN PSYCHO-BIOLOGICAL BASES OF RELIGION**

It is a psycho-biological truism that the instinct of self-preservation is the strongest and most native in man. Some existentialist have even termed this truism the central problem of philosophy. For Miguel de Unamuno, “Knowledge is employed in the service of the necessity of life and primarily in the service of the instinct of self-preservation. This necessity and this instinct have created in man the organs of knowledge and given them such capacity as they possess. Man sees, hears, tastes and smells that which it is necessary for him to see, hear, touch, taste, and smell in order to preserve his life” (1954: 23). We wish to know where we came from in order better to ascertain where we go from here; this universal of all humans “consists in the effort to persist eternally and without a break in the continuity of consciousness” (cf. J.I. Omoregbe.1993: p. 27). In fact, to show the universal nature of religion, “Dean Hamer came up with ‘the God-gene hypothesis, where he proposes that human beings from birth inherit a set of genes that predisposes them to believe in a higher power”.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Just as birth is not a sufficient explanation of the beginning or origin of life, death is also not seen as the surest guarantee of its end. The explanations must extend farther in both directions. The fact that our life is constantly being tormented by the fear of death does not remove our hope and aspiration for an endless life. This human instinct of survival after death has furnished many justifications for an after-life all of which are typically nurtured by religion. We have it from no mean Psychologist as Carl Jung that to remain emotionally healthy, man must give free expression to his religious yearnings, for the expression of the divine images lurked up in his unconscious; and that no patience can truly be cured until he attains a “religious attitude” – an attitude of complete trust and surrender to God. For our Psychologist, then, turning to God is not a sign of infantile helplessness or weakness in the face of a powerful destiny (as Sigmund Freud would tell us), not a man-made opium for the restless soul, but the expression of human nature” (M. Schmaus. 1968: 21), of what is truly human.

**5.4 MAN IN SEARCH OF MEANING AND VALUES**

Man is the meeting point of many conflicting forces, not just of indifferent nature, but of also of progress, ideologies, the vagaries and panorama attractions an distractions, of possible achievements that beckons on him, and contradictory experiences that he cannot fathom or reconcile with his mental framework. If not resolved into a simple synthesis, all of this can leave man existentially confused as to face suicide, extreme pessimism, existential absurdity, frustration and nihilism, or in the language of Karl Rahner, to leave man in the state of “gnoseological concupiscence”.[[9]](#footnote-9) Amidst all of life’s kaleidoscope and confusions, it is religion that helps man achieve oneness and simplicity, and so, manage to still give his life a sense of direction. For H.G Wells, therefore, religion is inescapable and man only tries to escape it at his own peril: Nearly all of us want something to hold us together, something to dominate this swarming confusion….We want more oneness, some steadying thing that will afford an escape from fluctuations (cf. B. Idowu. 1973: 2).

By the force of his nature, the human person is a being in search of meaning and values, even children as soon as they come to reasoning begin to ask fundamental questions which often leave the elders dumbfounded. The meaning and purpose of human life and is an existential question that every individual must face. And, for Cormak Burke, only two alternatives exist: a) man and life as absurdities, driven by instinct which lead nowhere; or 2) Man and life directed towards some higher goal, order in the world, and meaning in personal and social life” (C. Burke. 2007: 12). On the same subject, Pope John Paul II anchored human search for meaning on the search for Truth as such:

A cursory glance at ancient history shows clearly how in different parts of the world, with their different cultures, there arise at the same time the fundamental questions which pervade human life: Who am I? Where have I come from and where am I going? Why is there evil? What is there after this life?....They are questions which have their common source in the quest for meaning which has always compelled the human heart. In fact, the **answer** given to these **questions** decides the direction which people seek to give to their lives” (*Fides et Ratio*. 1998: no. 1).

We see in the above a passage from Physical Anthropology to Cultural Anthropology; and on the other hand, one answer to many questions – a pointer to an Ultimate, an Absolute, a God at the ground of being and existence. Beyond truth, which is universal anyway, people seek an absolute which might give to all their searching a meaning and an answer. “In other words, they seek a final explanation, a supreme value, which refers to nothing beyond itself and which puts an end to all questioning. Hypothesis may fascinate, but they do not satisfy. Whether we admit it or not, there comes for everyone the moment when personal existence must be anchored to a truth which confers a certitude no longer open to doubt” (Pope John Paul II. Ibid: no. 27). In scientific terms, it is seeking for an Absolute that is recognized as the centrifugal and centripetal points, the point of diffusion and convergence, of all existents. The human spirit naturally rebels against any “existential vacuum: - for if life has no ultimate meaning, then, it is reduced to absurdity. In this quest for meaningfulness, religious commitment is opting for an absolute value and the view that the unseen is more real that the seen, that the invisible is more than the visible, and that the invisible is the truly real, which upholds and enables us to face the visible with calm and composure – knowing that we are responsible before the Ultimate Reality that ground of all things.

“A value could be defined as an aspect of a reality that makes it seem attractive and desirable, or – and we are going up a scale – worthy of admiration. Alternatively, we can say that values are elements or goods that enrich life” (C. Burke. 2007: 35). It is co-extensive with belief which Joseph Ratzinger describes as follows: “It is a human way of taking up a stand in the totality of reality, a way that cannot be reduced to knowledge and is incommensurable with knowledge; it is the bestowal of meaning without which the totality of man will remain homeless, on which man’s calculations and actions are based, and without which in the last resort he could not calculate and act, because he can only do this in the context of a meaning that bears him up” (J. Ratzinger. 1969, 2004: 72). Now, unless we have a scale of values we do not have values at all. The nature of valuation requires some criterion by which some values are deemed or judged worthy than others. It is the values that confer meaning on realities for us, and they are judged or rated in relation to the ultimate end in which we find our fulfillment in life, the Absolute to whom we aspire and which inspires our valuation of valuables.

**5.5 FROM THE EVOLUTIONARY PERSPECTIVE**

Even from a purely evolutionary point of view, man differs from other life forms on the planet in that in him, matter the matter has evolved or matured to the point of becoming reflective and self-conscious. As such, he can reflect about his origin, his end, and his existence as such. In such reflection, he cannot fail to discover that he finds himself in a world he did not make but precedes him and will outlive him, a cosmos that is infinitely greater than him in time, content, extension and quality. Even in genetics, we knew that our very origin, in its tiniest and primordial conception, dates back to millions and billions of years, if not eternity. If, then, Teilhard de Chardin’s “law of complexity-consciousness” as spelt out in ‘The Phenomenon of Man’ is anything to go by, it means that the distinctive human quality of spirituality simply has to emerge once the complexity of life in its “without” has reached a definite stage – propelled as it were “from the beginning” by the “absolute principle” at the origin and end of cosmic evolution. Teilhard calls it the “Omega Point” – the apex point of arrival of creative evolution, which attracts them forward but which was also at their primordial and original point (cf. T. de Chardin. 1959: 16-17, 260-261; R. Lucas. 2005: 160-161). This is the reality that man seeks to be united and commune with in the afterlife and which religion best channels him towards.

According to the Jesuit paleoanthropologist, “Things have their ‘within’: their ‘reserve’, one might say; and this appears to stand in definite qualitative or quantitative connections with the developments that science recognizes in the cosmic energy”. Coextensive with their ‘Without’, there is a ‘Within’ to things” such that the spiritual perfection of things (their ‘within’) corresponds to their material complexity, that is, their ‘without (T. de Chardin. 1959: 54-56). The “within” is their consciousness, their spontaneity – all are three names for the same reality. There seems to be “a qualitative law of development that from sphere to sphere should be capable of explaining, first of all, the invisibility, then, the appearance, and then the gradual dominance of the within in comparison to the without of things” (1959: 61). If such is the reality of cosmic evolution in its unity and diversities, guided as it were by the law of complexity-consciousness; then, the “religious sense” has been part of human evolution even prior to the emergence of Homo sapiens; and can only be silenced or forced out of human nature at the risk of a reversal of evolution even far back beyond the stages of the hominids and the simplest life forms. For as Teilahrd tells us:

In the world, nothing could ever burst forth as final across the different thresholds successively traversed by evolution (however critical they may be) which has not already existed in an obscure and primordial way. If the organic had not existed from the first moment at which it was possible, it would never have begun later (Teilhard. 1959:71).

This evolutionary view finds strong footing in recent scientific discoveries of Relativity Theory, Quantum Physics and Uncertainty principles. It then seems to appear more clearly that we live not so much in a “cosmos” as in a “cosmogenesis” in which all things are connected to all other things by a relative or distant homogeneity that was initiated at the initial flaring forth of cosmic evolution by the Author of all reality and existence in their unity and diversities. This is what the modern “process thinkers” the likes of Henri Bergson, Teilhard de Chardin, Alfred North Whitehead and Ilya Prigogine, have taken the pains to articulate in various ways. It is not surprising that their various expositions are often similar: being scientific in data, mythic-spiritual in form, evolutionary in approach and surely philosophical in synthesis.

1. **MAN AND RELIGION**

Before God, man stands as a creature before his Creator (cf. Jer. 18:1-6). The practical implication is religion and a religious attitude to life in general. That man is a creature who has a Creator is all that remains even when every other statement about him is false. But this God is infinitely greater than man and beyond his comprehension. How then do we relate with Him? In the first place, how do we even talk about him to our understanding without diminishing his essence or reducing him to our own level?

**6.1 HOW DOES MAN RELATE WITH GOD?**

Prof. Richard McBrien speaks of three principles on which “Catholicism” is built. In essence, they principles that are presupposition for every religion. They are: the principle of communion, principle of mediation, and principle of sacramentality (1994:9ff). The principle of communion states that mutual communications and interactive exchange of interests are possible between God and man. The principle of mediation has it that while still on earth, the communion between God and man would be mediated and not be immediate; hence, the need for a mediator – the priest. And of the principle of sacramentality, it is submitted that based on the human natural need for sensible signs, communion between God and man would be mediated sacramentally, that is, with sensible signs bearing divine realities. Hence, the definition of a sacrament as “an outward sign of inward grace”. Every religion is based on and operates with these three principles as a matter of necessity; otherwise, it is something else in the guise of religion.

Human beings who are embodied can experience the spiritual and transcendental reality of God only through the medium of visible realities which are called symbols, and it is only through symbols that such experience can be further mediated. In the same way, God encounters and communicates with us only through symbols. A religious symbol is the meeting point between the human and the divine (K. Pathil & D. Veliath. 2007: 6).

Again, to speak of God at all among ourselves without diminishing his essence or reducing him to our level is another task of every religion. Since we know more of what God is not than of what He is, believers are left with analogical mode of expression in speaking about God. In univocal expression, a particular word or language is used with exactly the same meaning in all cases. And, in equivocal language, the same word or expression may be used for entirely different things with the consequence that they do not signify anything or that they signify entirely unrelated different things. Like saying: “Albert Einstein is *taller* than all his scientific giants of the 20th century.” The word “taller” as used here has an entirely different meaning from what it means in common usage. In Analogical expressions, a word is predicated of a subject in a similar way from what it means in conventional usage; so it implies both similarity and difference. The basis of analogy in religious language is that “all creatures bear a certain resemblance to God, most especially man, created in the image and likeness of God. The manifold perfection of creatures - their truth, their goodness, their beauty – all reflect the infinite perfection of God. Consequently, we can name God by taking his creatures’ perfection as our starting point” (C.C.C. no. 41).

The above conclusion points in the direction of “anthropomorphism” – the ascription of human characteristics to non-human beings, especially to God in religious language. It crosses boundary with “personification” – which is the ascription of human quality with non-human beings of lower status, like plants, animals and abstract concepts. “Anthropomorphism has always being a concomitant of religion, all religions, every faith. In the purest religion that human heart can conceive, there can be no way of avoiding anthropomorphism. We can only console ourselves by speaking of degrees or levels of anthropomorphism when comparing religions” (B. Idowu.1973: 58-59). In anthropomorphism, man relates with God as a personal Being whom he could best conceive in the best term known to him, that is, as one who has the attributes of active, purposeful livingness. Of course, there are sometimes, exaggerations and distortions in anthropomorphism, conceiving God in human terms, but in the best possible way, is the mode available to man in speaking with a personal God. At the other extreme f anthropomorphism is “divinization” where human and sometimes, less human creatures are ascribed divine qualities, and worshipped as such.

**6.2 MYSTICISM, RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE, AND DIVINE REVELATION**

 God is “Transcendent” in that He is above, beyond and over everything else. God is the one to whom all reality is oriented**.** He thus rightfully demands our obeisance and we readily give it. We accept whatever he reveals and make religion out of it – religion being in the final analysis, God’s revelation and human response. In this case, both God and man play responsible roles in religion: God consciously initiates the revelation, man actively responds to it. Revelation, therefore, is integral and foundational to religion – as many scholars of relevance submit: “Religion is a revelation of guidelines with a vision to reach the unknown. This is why it becomes inevitable to respect and acknowledge particular sources of religious guidelines in so far as they are revealed by God” (A. Akin-Otiko: 2015: 16). Paul Tillich explains further: revelation is “a special and extraordinary manifestation which removes the veil from something which is hidden in a special and extraordinary way” (cf. J.I. Omoregbe. 1993:19). The mode of revelation is both by words and deeds, in nature (cosmos), and in history (human affairs); both complement each other (Vatican Council II. *Dei Verbum*: 1965: no. 2).

 A typical mode of divine revelation in human affairs is via mystical experience. Yes, many mystics have claimed to have received, during their mystical religious experiences, certain messages to deliver to mankind which they often champion as a life mission and vocation – often with heroic determination and resilience against all odds. All religion is said to be based, in the final analysis, on the religious experience of the mystic who makes contact directly with the divine and who passes something of this in form of revelation on to the many who are not capable of having such experience. Mysticism is a religious phenomenon in all religions all over the world. It is described by William James as a state of “insight into the depth of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect”. According to him “In mystic states, we both become one with the Absolute and we become aware of our oneness. This is the everlasting and triumphant mystical tradition, hardly altered by the differences of clime or creed (W. James. 1960: 404).

 In general, one may define religious experience as that intimate and immediate awareness of being touched or grasped by the Divine. For Edward Schillibeeckx, in religious experience the individual is in touch with the “really real” which escapes neat concepts and categories; and though images and concepts enable us to speak of the experience, it is beyond words and is pre-conceptual. Such experience transcend senses and intellect even though the experience many involve senses and intellect. Rudolf Otto describes the “Holy” encountered in religious experience as a fascinating and terrifying mystery which reveals and conceals, brings bliss and evokes awe at the same time. For the object of religion “is beyond our apprehension and comprehension, not only because our knowledge has certain irremovable limits, but because in it we come upon something inherently ‘wholly other’ whose kind and character is incommensurable with our own, and before which we therefore recoil in wonder that trikes us chill and dumb” (R. Otto: 1959:42).

 Even with his privileged religious experience, the mystic may not lay claim to any definitive or exclusive say on religion. For, it still stands to reason that ***“Quid quid recipitur ad modum recipientis recipitur” (***Whatever is received is received according to the mode of the receiver). In fact, God adapts his revelation to the condition of the mental level and the stage of historical development of the recipient and his context or culture. “Religion and Revelation condition one another: as God by revelation becomes more intelligible, man in religion becomes more intelligent; the objective content further develops the subjective capacity” (A.C. Bouquet. Comparative Religions: 1933:p. 85). Therefore, since the receiver is limited in experience, in age, in exposure, in education and other relevant variables, yet what he receives comes from the bosom Infinity, two indubitable conclusions present themselves: the mystic’s interpretation of divine revelation cannot exhaust all the sense of the revelation; and, other categories of understanding and interpretation of the same revelation are possible. For, while revelation “unveils” the mystery, the “Wholly Other”, quite alright, it at the same time conceals IT, since the mystery still retains its mysterious character and does not cease to be a mystery. “Divine revelation”, we are told,

is not inextricable bound up with any one worldview; any conception of the world can serve as a form to express what God has revealed of himself. No matter how closely connected the content of divine self-revelation as found in God’s utterance to the recipient of that revelation may be with the particular speech-form of the recipient, the two dimensions are still not identical and can therefore be separated from each other” (M. Schamaus. 1968: 26).

Every experience requires a categorical framework in and with which it is interpreted. Such mental framework for the interpretation of experience is a property not of any individual but of the cultural community. Experience is related to and influenced by other experiences all of which form the framework for interpretation. Symbols and categories handed on by the community are appropriated by the individuals and used to make sense of their own experiences. From this standpoint, then, every experience is basically “human experience”; to term a certain experience “religious” experience is a matter of interpretation. In this is also seen the humanity of religion as an essential aspect of human nature, as well as the role of culture in religion from which it can never be divorced. After the mystical experience comes theological reflection on the experience, to establish its continuity with the pool or mainstream religious belief of the community, or shed light on some aspects of it. Sometimes, certain contents of religious experience are thereby rejected as incompatible with religious orthodoxy and the basic creed of the believing community. This leads to the interpretation of divine revelation.

The authorities of various religions have their template for the evaluation and interpretation of divine revelation in any form, and no one religious system can be paradigmatic for all in this regard. So, we have recourse to a general, non-religious or inter-religious model. Understanding distortion in religious experience and the psychic location of religious experience is facilitated today by an aspect of contemporary Psychoanalysis called “Object Relation Theory”. “This theory gives central place to early relationships with primary figures (parents, close relatives, others who live in the same house, etc) in the constitution of one’s personality and the establishment of one’s relationship to the world. It claims that mental representations of others are gradually built up in the mind by a process of internalization” (cf. J. Komonchak, e.t.al. 1999: 371). It is from this that one fashions a “world of his/her own”, an internal world where present experiences build on the past and are interpreted in the light of the mental images and representations in one’s inner world; the same storage in the “inner world” influences in varying degrees our external relationship with others, the deity inclusive. In religion, therefore, religious experience, mysticism, and divine revelation are often intertwined, with none having a definitive say on the essence of religion, but stand as complements.

**6.3. THE PRACTICE OF RELIGION, ITS ROLES AND FUNCTIONS**

Religion is not just an internal act of faith or belief in a supernatural being; it does not consist just in the virtue of piety which disposes us to the pay homage of due honour to God and superiors; it involves external and social acts as well: bodily gestures, words and actions, use of material elements and gifts of nature, and even in building social structures and organizations. St. Thomas Aquinas teaches that Religion is expressed essentially by internal acts of the soul; secondarily it is expressed by suitable external acts. Man is body and soul, it is inevitable therefore that in religion, which honours God, the bodily faculties should have some expressions of to make, in external and bodily acts, in sensible signs, actions and ceremonies” (S.Th. IIa IIae, q. 81, n. 7). Religion thus lends itself to social scrutiny, a subject of investigation for social scientists. It is legitimate to ask then: what is the purpose of religion? How does it add value and quality to human life? What does it contribute to human general well-being? What does it concretely bring to the table in terms of human subsistence and sustainable needs? Of what relevance is religion among the social institutions of man?

Religion offers the experience of spiritual fulfillment by inviting man into the highest realm of the spirit. At its peak, religion creates a relationship with the divine. There is also a lower function of religion where it is a possibility for humans to experience consistent meaning in life, enjoy guidance and blessings. (A. Akin-Otiko. 2015: 9). It binds humans vertically to God and horizontally among themselves. Religion binds families, communities, and humans in general through shared beliefs and practices. It give rise to the spirit of brotherhood even among those who are separated by tribes and races. Philosophically, religion provides answers to rational questions that arise when man realizes his limitations, how there is something out there beyond the veil of death. Psychologically, religion provides an opening for the control and discharge of tension, despair and worry thanks to faith in the Supreme Being who is believed to have solution to every problem. Religion also plays a crucial role in education. Not only in the doctrines it enunciates, but also in the ceremonies and rituals it carries out. Initiation rites, in the various religions, for instance, provide opportunity for extended instruction on the values and traditions of the socio-cultural system. Perhaps, more than all these is the moral functions of religion as it promotes good moral behavior and discourages immorality - the first which attracts the blessing and good favour of the deity, the second which invites his punishment.

From the sociological point of view, religion functions as a mechanism through which people adjust to the inevitable facts of human existence. “There are certain characteristics of human conditions which made religious belief inevitable. They are: Uncertainty: the inability of man to certainly determine his environment at all times; Powerlessness: inability to control our environment at all times; and Scarcity: never enough to go round at all times. In the functionalist view” (A.N.T. Onyebuchi, e.t.al: 136). In the face of all these “inevitables”, religion ensures harmony between man and God who is believed to be all-powerful and benevolent; this gives the psychological satisfaction that and the needed motivation to move on in the face of hardship, and so keep the society from disorder and anarchy.

1. **CONCLUSION: RELIGION AND THE FUTURE, THE CHALLENGE BEFORE US**

 We have so far been able to demonstrate that religion is inevitable without prejudice to the pockets of individuals who profess to be atheists. Not only is it presented as a natural need to individuals, it is a “cultural universal” wherever human beings migrate and form a community. There is a natural need and inclination in man, deeply native and basic, which makes religion a matter of “ultimate concern”. This accounts for the enduring paradox that many non-believers have not been able to resolve about religion, namely, “that so much of its substance is demonstrably false, yet it remains a driving force in all societies. Men would rather believe than know, have the void as purpose, as Nietzsche said, than be void of purpose” (E. Wilson. 1975: 561).

Even among the elite and policy makers at the echelon of the social ladder, there are millions of people today who still find some repose in religion in the face of radical upheaval of globalization to allay the anxiety of a world fraught with dangers and uncertainties. “The need to find deeper meaning in life and to make sense of an increasingly complex, uncharted, and often confusing, even frightening world, continues to drive human beings to explore not only scientifically, but also religiously and spiritually” (Haviland, e.t.al. 2011: 553). We see this, for instance, in the growing interest and participation pilgrimages and spiritual healing ceremonies, and persistent desire to safeguard certain buildings and natural places that have been designated as sacred sites. This is humanity in search of meaning. Same is true in the face of cultural hegemony or collective feelings of great distress and despair - the people have often embark on emancipation via revitalization movements for radical cultural reform. Such revitalization movements are often built around certain cultural values or religious cult that grip a sizable portion of the population.

 The plurality of religions equally finds a place in our sense of values and meaningfulness as it appears inevitable based among other things on the multiplicity of cultures and the personalities of mystics and founders of religion. This can even be inferred as a divine ordinance from the theological depth of St Thomas Aquinas; he writes:

Both distinction of things and multitude of things come from God. In creating, God communicates his goodness (to possible creatures); creatures are to represent and manifest the divine goodness. And goodness, which in God, is simple, in creatures is diversified; what phase of the divine goodness one creature fails to represent may be represented by another. The whole multiple and varied universe manifests the divine goodness more perfectly than any single creature could do.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Thus, with his limited intellect, limited experience, worldview, and limited mental framework, no mystic or culture can perfectly represent the Absolute; and this, to a large extent is what we see in the diversity of true religions. The summons religious practitioners to embrace the path of inter-religious dialogue in principle and practice. For indeed, world religions have many things in common than many religious practitioners are willing to admit; they borrow and adapt to one another, and they seek to be up-to-date in satisfying man’s native inclination as well as his current yearning in his historical pilgrimage. As laudable as the project is, however, one fact we must not overlook in interreligious dialogue is the various meanings and senses in which the same religious or theological terms are employed and the implications they carry for their users. The truth is that though “the religions recognize essential attributes of the divinity as omnipotence, omniscience, goodness, justice. But to understand the doctrinal coherence of each religion and to overcome ambiguities of an apparently common language, it is necessary to understand the axis on which these divine names turn” (I.T.C. 1997: 107,f).

The challenge before all practitioners of religion which is most likely going to give direction to the future of religion is well articulated by Thomas Berry in what he called “The Third Mediation” and the consequent challenges (1982, 2012: 1-25). He distinguished three phases in the development of religio-cultural traditions: Three phases in the development of religious traditions. The first is the Scriptural stage when the primordial revelation is codified in oral or written form; the second is the Patristic stage when the religious tradition is deepened as it comes in contact with larger worldview and contrary traditions; the third stage is the period of expansion when every religious tradition in its more evolved stage interact with other religious traditions (pp. 17ff). Corresponding to these three stages is the task of three mediation that that have to be achieved. In the first place, there is the need to deepen the divine-human relationship (the first mediation); secondly, there is the task of deepening inter-human relationship, of reconciling humans among themselves regardless of their differences; the third is mediation is “the mediation between the human community and the Earth, the planet that surrounds and support us and upon which we depend in an absolute fashion for our nourishment and our breadth” (pp. 8ff). Religions are thus challenged individually and collectively to “identify the spiritual dynamics of the new cosmological story given us by modern science” (p. 5), and to enter into serious alliance with it to preserve our common home and collective existence. This task of the last challenge seems to have been set in motion by the New Age of Aquarius Movement – its sustainability and universalization, however, is cast in great doubt.

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1. B. Swimme & T. Berry. *The Universe Story. From the Primordial Flaring Forth to the Ecozoic Era*: New York, Harper San Francisco, 1992, 1994, p. 202. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Cf. J. Ratzinger. *Introduction to Christianity*: San Francisco, Ignatius Press, 1990, 2004, p. 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. R. Melterry, *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*: Chicago, Encyclopaedia Britannica Inc. 15th edition, Vol.5, 1974, p.683. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. A.N.T. Onyenuchie, e.t.al. *Sociology. An Introductory Text*: Benin City, Edo State, Union Books Nationwide, 2000, p. 136. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. W.C. Smith. *The Meaning and End of Religion*: Mentor Books, 1964, p. 62. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Cf. J. Komonchak, e.t.al. *The New Dictionary of Theology*: Bangalore, Theological Publications in India, 1999, pp. 864-865. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. “There is so much inside each of us that stretches beyond the surrounding reality and perhaps beyond the realm of what seems possible. Reality is limited; human ambition is not. In the last analysis, one of two conclusions must be drawn from this restless inner world of ours: either human dreams are just illusions and vain hopes; or else man points to something more than man” (C. Burke: *Man and Values*: *A Personalist Anthropology*: Limuru, Scepter Publishers 2007p. 167) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Dean Hamer is the Director of the “Gene Structure and Regulation Unit” at the U.S National Cancer Institute; beyond the hypothesis, he has written a book on the subject titled, 'The God Gene: How Faith is hardwired into our Genes’ (Cf. A. Akin-Otiko. *The Study of Religion & Issues in the Religions of the Africans*: Lagos, University of Lagos Press and Bookshop Ltd, 2020, p. 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Almost at the point of desperation and intellectual pessimism, he writes: “Today, a pluralism exists in regional cultures, philosophies, terminologies, outlooks, theologies, and so on, which can no longer be reduced to any one synthesis; and so vividly has the Church become aware of this that I can no longer imagine that any specific and at the same time, genuinely new proposition can be expressed that can be felt so thoroughly to be an expression of the conscious faith of the whole church as to be capable of definition” (K. Rahner. “The Concept of Infallibility in Catholic Theology”, in *Theological Investigation*, London, Sheed and Ward, 1974, pp. 72-73). [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Summa Theologiae. 1a, q.47, art.1; in P.J. Glenn. *A Tour of the Summa of St Thomas Aquinas*: Bangalore, Theological Publications in India, 1999, p. 42. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)